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**Jane Austen's Powers of Consciousness**

**Thesis Submitted to  
The Graduate College of  
Marshall University**

**In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
Humanities**

**by**

**Diane M. Counts**

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Dr. Arline R. Thorn  
Dr. Reidun Ovrebo  
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**Marshall University**

**April 2003**

## **Abstract**

### **“Jane Austen’s Powers of Consciousness”**

**By: Diane M. Counts**

This thesis incorporates information from recent biographies, feminist studies, and scholarly interpretations focusing on Jane Austen’s narrative strategies. Such incorporation of material provides a context for understanding the significance of Austen’s contributions to the novel form and illuminating the development of the female narrative voice. It focuses on *Emma*, Austen’s last novel published during her lifetime, as an exemplification of Austen’s enunciation of a feminine perspective of life and vocalization of a growing female self-awareness—her powers of consciousness—through Emma. Of primary concern is Austen’s use of narrative techniques enabling the reader to become intimately acquainted and empathetic with Emma; her use of irony and female perspective to create a sympathetic, non-traditional female character ideologically accepted by her reading public; and her ability to articulate a feminine consciousness through the evolution of Emma’s character.

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## Chapter 1: A Dawning Feminine Consciousness

### *Who Will Speak?*

In 1852, George Henry Lewes characterized the “exquisite art” of Jane Austen:

We recognize the second and more special quality of womanliness in the tone and point of view: they are novels written by a woman, an Englishwoman, a gentlewoman; no signature could disguise that fact; and because she has so faithfully (although unconsciously) kept to her own womanly point of view, her works are durable. There is nothing of the *doctrinaire* in Jane Austen; not a trace of woman’s “mission”; but as the most truthful, charming, humorous, pureminded, quick-witted, and unexaggerated of writers, female literature has reason to be proud of her. (qtd. in Parrish: 370)

Such criticism was typical of the time, a man praising the “female literature” being produced, literature that is durable despite its “womanly point of view.” Lewes finds her writing commendable because Austen promotes no social message of “mission” (as did Wollstonecraft) and because she has a pleasant personality. His assessment, albeit superficial and offensive to feminist sensibilities, offers a useful perspective from which to begin an examination into the narrative strategies and messages that have made Austen enduring and explain why her works continue to receive critical attention.

This early critical statement by Lewes reflects the attitudes toward women and women’s writing during the nineteenth century. Lewes finds that women’s voices are apparent and praiseworthy when they focus on appropriate subjects for females. He fails to discern the subtle strategies used to convey this female literature. Recent period studies and biographies confirm the difficulties women writers encountered as emerging voices, and an increasingly serious body of scholarship has delved into the narrative strategies and covert “missions.” Between 1963 and 2003, more than twenty-two hundred scholarly books and articles were published on Austen, and more than five hundred of these were concentrated on *Emma*. Austen’s novels are on reading lists in high schools and colleges around the country, and several of her novels have been made

into successful television series and movies. More than fifteen websites have been established around the world. All of this attention on a woman who was only moderately successful as an author in her own time gives rise to questions about Austen's literary stature and her drawing power among readers and movie-goers.

The life and works of Jane Austen have generated significant scholarship in the last forty years. This thesis incorporates major strands of the scholarship as it considers how this rather ordinary woman, operating within the parameters set by the society of her time, was able to make a significant contribution to the literary world. Of particular importance is Austen's development of a feminine narrative voice, a signal of the verbal emergence of female consciousness. This study brings together information from recent biographies, feminist studies of the cultural climate of Austen's time, and scholarly interpretations that focus on Austen's narrative strategies. The first two sources provide a context for understanding the significance of Austen's contributions to the novel form. The last source illuminates the development of the narrative voice.

This study will be primarily concerned with Austen's most esteemed novel, *Emma*, originally published in 1816, and the last of Austen's novels to be published in her lifetime. First, this examination will focus on *Emma* as an exemplification of Austen's enunciation of a feminine perspective of life and vocalization of this growing female self-awareness—her powers of consciousness—through the protagonists in her novels. Various techniques to voice this consciousness, such as the development of the free indirect style of narration, a technique first extensively introduced by her, and her incorporation of irony into her narrative, will be studied. Of primary concern is how these techniques enable the reader to become intimately acquainted and empathetic with Austen's main characters. Her alternating use of narrative intimacy and

distance, which affords the reader both an interior and exterior point of view into the minds of her characters, will be observed; her use of irony and female perspective to create a sympathetic, non-traditional female character who would be ideologically accepted by her reading public will be considered. Finally, this study will examine Austen's ability to articulate this feminine consciousness through the evolution of Emma's character.

The remainder of this opening chapter will survey the historic period in which Austen was born and will take a contextual look at her life during that time. Chapter 2 will elaborate on criticism directly related to Austen's feminist and narrative techniques in *Emma*. Chapter 3 will present a summary of *Emma* and a close feminist reading of the book, followed by an elaboration of connections and similarities between Austen's feminist awareness and that of her protagonist, Emma. Chapter 4 will complete the examination and suggest reasons for Austen's continued popularity.

### ***New Readers, New Writers***

The era in which Austen was born was like most periods of history, a period of transition. During the late seventeen hundreds and early eighteen hundreds, England, as a country, was in a period of turmoil—the onset of the Industrial Revolution and the changing social order and consequent ascent of the middle class brought great changes in class and gender expectations. The growing population became more mobile. Middle class families, who were busy earning money through trade or professions, aided in the increased development of towns and cities. The shifting of funds from the upper class to the rising middle class increased the accessibility of books to the public. Lending libraries and cheap publications allowed easy access to genres that were previously available, and of interest, only to the wealthy. Two of these genres were novels and conduct books. According to Nancy



Armstrong, “Conduct books addressed a readership comprising various levels and sources of income and included virtually all people who distinguished themselves from the aristocracy, on the one hand, and from the laboring poor on the other” (897).

Coincidentally, or sociologically, the development of that middle class increased the volume of writings by women. Accessibility to the written word and increased literacy of both sexes meant that more and more women were reading. Their worlds were expanding, and many took the next step by becoming writers. Publications of all sorts began to flourish, and, as a result, more opportunities became available for female authors to break into a traditionally male literary world. Of further significance, the moderate literary and financial success these women were experiencing served to bolster confidence and a sense of achievement. Women were, in fact, quietly working their way into the mainstream and exerting an influence over the females coming after them. Austen was one of these writers.

The novels for which Austen is most well known, i.e., *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), *Persuasion* (1818), and *Northanger Abbey* (1818), were all written with a feminine, and, one might say, feminist vocalization. The setting for each of them was similar to the setting of Austen’s own life—the increasingly tenuous upper-middle class. The cast of characters usually included those people considered to be the upper crust of rural society, those perched on the margins of gentility and faced with ever-encroaching poverty, and those who were buying their way up the social ladder. These novels ostensibly focused upon day-to-day pastoral affairs, conduct and manners, and the familiar themes of love and marriage. The main characters, though, were women who were increasingly unafraid to speak their minds. Austen’s protagonists were females who spoke and thought independently and were intelligent and articulate; they possessed a female awareness that was

being focalized, and vocalized, by their own sex. Most importantly, her characters verbalized an expanding feminine perspective of men, society and women's place in the society.

### *A Contextual Look at Austen's Life*

Although Austen has traditionally been portrayed as having remained part of a small world, reviews of her life paint a somewhat different picture. She was well read, and, although she was not a world traveler, she managed to visit London and Bath and a multitude of relatives in different locales, meeting and making acquaintances with a large number of people. She was born in Steventon, Hampshire, England, in 1775, the daughter of a clergyman. For a short time, Jane and her sister Cassandra, to whom she remained close all of her life, were placed at the Abbey School in Reading under Madame Latourelle, a place where *British Authors of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* tells us "girls might be sent to be out of the way, and scramble themselves into a little education without any danger of coming back prodigies" (40). After a very brief period of formal education, both Jane and Cassandra, like many other females of their time, were further educated at home. This was in direct contrast to the education of most males of Austen's class, who would often have been sent away to boarding school for long periods of time. Austen's later education, probably supervised by her scholarly father, included much reading on varied subject matter by a broad variety of authors.

John Halperin, in *The Life of Jane Austen*, tells us that Austen read Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Thomson, Gray, Hume, Sherlock, Sheridan, Barette, Price, Blair, Gilpin, Payne Knight, and the *Spectator*. As well, she read contemporary writers, such as Johnson, Cowper, Crabbe, and Goldsmith. In addition to these, she is said to have read eighteenth-century fiction by Fielding, Richardson, Sterne, Charlotte Smith, Charlotte Lennox, Ann Radcliffe, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and other contemporaries. She learned French and Italian, studied history,

played the pianoforte, and was taught to draw, sew, and embroider. Halperin further tells us that Austen was brought up in a non-restrictive environment as far as reading or topics of conversation were concerned, allowing her to question, rather than to blindly accept blanket statements (26-27). She began entertaining herself and her family at an early age with her literary works. She was, therefore, an experienced author by her young adulthood. Although she lived during a time of social change, her relatives, particularly her brother Henry and her nephew James-Edward Austen-Leigh, considered her life to be uneventful.

Claire Tomalin, in *Jane Austen: A Life*, explains that Austen's life, while not fraught with infamous occurrences to report, was far from being "not by any means a life of event," as Henry was said to have penned in a biographical note after her death (6). She relates that, although Jane was the daughter of a clergyman, and her family came from a long line of genteel blood, the Austens' financial situation was less than ideal. Her father, George, "was heavily in debt, owing money on all sides. [. . .] His accounts show a perpetual juggling of debt repayments and new borrowings[ . . .]" (7). He himself had grown up an orphan, at the mercy of his relatives and, therefore, brought no money to his marriage, nor did his wife; and they held little prospect of large inheritances. As a result, Jane was born into a family with no existing fortune, although she was distantly related to nobility, and her father owed a fair amount of debt for a good part of his life. In order to supplement their income, her parents ran a boarding school in the parsonage. Consequently, Jane grew up in a household with an older sister, four older brothers and one younger brother, and five male students who came to board full-time. Jane also benefited from the fact that her schoolmaster father had a library with a broad array of reading materials. With such a predominance of masculine influence and a large literary resource at her fingertips, Jane would, most likely, have been comfortable and unintimidated in the company of males and in the

presence of a treasure trove of virtually unlimited learning materials. Tomalin points out that Austen read and enjoyed both *Tom Thumb* and *Tom Jones*, the latter being a story concerned with sex and one that would have been considered highly inappropriate for any young lady to read (115).

David Nokes provides a somewhat different angle to Jane Austen's life in his intimate view of Austen in *Jane Austen: A Life*. He "challenges the familiar image of her as a literary maiden aunt": "This is not because I wish to offer any slight to her genius. It is because I prefer to present her *not* in the modest pose which her family determined for her, but rather, as she most frequently presented herself, as rebellious, satirical and wild" (7).

This statement expresses the frustration many modern biographers have felt when attempting to research Austen's life. Austen's family destroyed many of her personal letters that might have tended to show her in an unbecoming light. Nokes reveals that the guiltiest party in the destruction was her sister, Cassandra, who obliterated many of Jane's letters that Cassandra thought were particularly unflattering. Although the eradication of such revealing biographical information has impeded researchers' ability to obtain details of her life, Nokes provides the reader with an amusing, ironic view of Jane's very brief (twelve hours long) engagement to Harris Bigg-Wither, an event in her life that demonstrates her courage and strength of character. Nokes reports that Bigg-Wither did not grieve himself overly much after Austen first accepted and then rejected him, but that, less than two years after Austen's refusal, "consoled himself by marrying Anne Howe Frith, of Carisbrooke on the Isle of Wight, whose father was a lieutenant-colonel in the North Hants militia" (258). Nokes' vivid description of Austen's inward turmoil about her impulsive acceptance of Bigg-Wither, and her mighty struggle over whether or not to opt for a situation that would be positive financially, along with his speculation that she may

have discussed the matter with her sister Cassandra, make the scenario sound realistic and believable. Her final, painful decision to renege on her marriage promise makes her appear similar to a character in a Jane Austen novel. Nokes also includes a telling declaration from Austen's niece, Caroline Austen, written after the engagement debacle, which indicates both Caroline's admiration for her aunt and further corroborates Austen's courage:

To be sure she should not have said yes—over night. But I have always respected her for the courage in cancelling that yes—the next morning. All worldly advantage would have been to her—& she was of an age to know *this* quite well. My aunts had very small fortunes & on their father's death they & their mother would be, they were aware, but poorly off. I believe most young women so circumstanced would have taken Mr. W. & trusted to love after marriage [. . .] (258).

Austen perhaps inserted a bit of this painful experience into *Emma*, when Emma unequivocally states: "I am not only not going to be married at present, but have very little intention of ever marrying at all. [. . .] If I were to marry, I must expect to repent it" (92). It is not clear if Austen felt, at that point, that if she *ever* married she would repent it, but apparently she felt sorely that if she married then, to Bigg-Wither, she would surely rue the day. Her correction, and Caroline's commentary, illustrate that Austen was courageous and atypical in her perspective towards marriage.

A look at the literary atmosphere that permeated British society during the time in which Austen lived, from 1775 to 1817 can be found in Halperin's book, as well as that of Jan Fergus and Janice Farrar Thaddeus, "Women, Publishers, and Money" (1987). Halperin describes the environment as "an age of rigid class distinctions [. . .] of practical realism [. . .] and the first great age of newspapers and advertising," and as a time when "magazines of all sorts flourished; for the first time anywhere writers could actually make a living by their pens alone" (11). According to Fergus and Thaddeus, during the late eighteenth century, if a woman considered

herself to be genteel, then she had few acceptable options for earning money if the need arose. This circumstance often pressured women of Austen's class into marriage for the sake of financial security. Fergus and Thaddeus consider that, during this period, an appropriate and acceptable alternative to this sort of marriage was a writing career. If one could achieve success, such a career allowed a woman to earn a living wage while simultaneously allowing her gentility to remain intact. Fergus and Farrar trace this as a major factor for "the rush of women into print during the last half of the century" (191). The popularity of the novel was also rising and, therefore, increasing the demand.

Katharine M. Rogers, in *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* (1982), discusses the progress women writers, like Austen, made in the eighteenth century, and attributes such progress to the benefit they received from "feminine awareness developed by earlier women writers. Like them, she [Austen] focused on an intelligent young woman, through whose eyes she presented women, men, and the world" (225). She speaks to Austen's awareness, and satirical treatment, of the traditional role she and her female contemporaries had to fulfill.

As the biographers make clear, Austen's home, with boarding students and a diverse library, was a fortunate environment for a budding writer. There her world expanded through reading, conversation, and juvenile writing. In Chapter 2, a second kind of evidence, criticism of Austen's literary endeavors, will be examined.

## Chapter 2: Criticism Relating to Austen's *Emma* *Then and Now*

The focus of criticism relating to Austen's works, as one might imagine, has fluctuated somewhat over the years, particularly as it relates to *Emma*. Austen herself began the criticism of *Emma* before the work was even started by declaring she was going to create "a heroine whom no one but myself might like" (*Emma* vii). These were pretty daring words for a woman who was on the fringe of being called a successful author and who was making her works available for both public consumption and unrestricted censure. When Austen wrote *Emma*, her contemporary critics were trying to discern its meaning, and scholars today are still laboring over what Austen might have been trying to say. As might be expected, critics of her day and the years immediately following saw this work as belonging in the genre of the romantic novel; possible complex properties or abstract meanings were not analyzed. Many of the recent criticisms, however, have focused on the feminist and ironic qualities of Austen's work; others deal with the different aspects of Austen's innovative method of alternating narrative consciousness and voice.

This latter group examines Austen's technique for allowing the reader to become intimately acquainted with her main character. However, even older critics, i.e., Wayne Booth (1960s), studied and analyzed her method of narrative consciousness. Although the center of Booth's work deals with Austen's control of distance in the minds of her characters, he, too, discusses the reader's increasing intimacy with the protagonist. One narrative technique discussed is the free indirect style of narration and how it creates for the reader an illusion of entry into the consciousness of fictional characters. Another is the development of what one scholar refers to as Austen's "stage soliloquy" (Wood 28). Other studies concentrate on the ironic effect in Austen's work. Interestingly, males have penned most of the accounts that

concentrate on the movement of the narrative voice and the ironic flavor of the prose. Other, later works more closely examine feminism in Austen's novels, and, as one might assume, female authors have written most of those. In general the criticism on Austen seems to have bifurcated into a male-dominated interest in Austen's irony and method of revealing inner thought and a female-dominated interest in the articulation of an emerging feminine consciousness.

The criticism by Austen's contemporaries reveals that some features of *Emma*, as a romantic novel, were valued while others were not. In the *Quarterly Review* for 1815, Sir Walter Scott declared that there was really not much substance to *Emma* and, in his review of the book, plots an uncomplicated story for his reading audience:

Miss Emma Woodhouse, from whom the book takes its name, is the daughter of a gentleman of wealth and consequence residing at his seat in the immediate vicinity of a country village called Highbury. The father, a good-natured, silly valetudinary, abandons the management of his household to Emma, he himself being only occupied by his summer and winter walk, his apothecary, his gruel, and his whist table. The latter is supplied from the neighbouring village of Highbury with precisely the sort of persons who occupy the vacant corners of a regular whist table, when a village is in the neighbourhood, and better cannot be found within the family. We have the smiling and courteous vicar, who nourishes the ambitious hope of obtaining Miss Woodhouse's hand. We have Mrs. Bates, the wife of a former rector, past every thing but tea and whist; her daughter, Miss Bates, a good-natured, vulgar, and foolish old maid; Mr. Weston, a gentleman of a frank disposition and moderate fortune, in the vicinity, and his wife an amiable and accomplished person, who had been Emma's governess, and is devotedly attached to her. (qtd. in Parrish: 367)

Scott abbreviated the list of the cast of characters, and took the story at face value, equating unassuming and unpretentious with inconsequential. Accordingly, he has not attributed any of the features of Austen's style of writing to the purpose of the novel, features such as the narrative devices and feminist strategies she employs to quietly transform a conventional scenario into a platform for female verbal authority. Nor does he consider any of the



implications of the placement in society of Austen's characters. It should be pointed out that Scott made a telling shift from plot to character in his review. He began by telling the reader that "*Emma* has even less story than either of the preceding novels" (qtd. in Parrish: 367), presumably meaning *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice* as the preceding novels. He ended his review with the following lines:

The author's knowledge of the world, and the peculiar tact with which she presents characters that the reader cannot fail to recognize, reminds us something of the merits of the Flemish school of painting. The subjects are not often elegant, and certainly never grand; but they are finished up to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader (qtd. in Parrish: 369).

Just prior to these last lines, he indicates the level of his enthusiasm for Austen's prose by saying,

Such is the simple plan of a story which we peruse with pleasure, if not with deep interest, and which perhaps we might more willingly resume than one of those narratives where the attention is strongly riveted, during the first perusal, by the powerful excitement of curiosity. (qtd. in Parrish: 369)

When viewed in today's context, these particular remarks might be termed as damning with faint praise. He delves not into the development of Austen's characters, but, rather, treats them as static, arbitrary, familiar figures. He has, with a few words, marginalized Austen's *Emma* as a shallow, non-taxing fable. His reading of the novel has touched only the surface of her text.

Scott's lukewarm review gives way, in 1852, to George Henry Lewes' excessive praise for Austen's works, in which he calls her the "greatest artist that has ever written," even repeating Macaulay's assertion that Austen is "a prose Shakespeare." Lewes tells us that "Her circle may be restricted, but it is complete" (qtd. in Parrish: 369). His praise for her appears high:

Only cultivated minds fairly appreciate the exquisite art of Miss Austen. Those who demand the stimulus of “effects;” those who can only see by strong lights and shadows, will find her tame and uninteresting. [. . .] The incidents, the characters, the dialogue—all are of every day life, and so truthfully presented, that to appreciate the art we must try to imitate it, or carefully compare it with that of others. [. . .] Never does she transcend her own actual experience, never does her pen trace a line that does not touch the experience of others. (qtd. in Parrish: 370)

Thus he has touched on not only the surface of Austen’s writing, but also her knowledge of human nature within what he terms her restrictive circle. Lewes does not follow quite the same path through Austen’s novels that Scott pursued. However, as mentioned previously, Lewes also sets her apart as being somewhat unprofound when he differentiates her as a female author, an “other”: “they are novels written by a woman, an Englishwoman, a gentlewoman [. . .] but as the most truthful, charming, humorous, pureminded, quick-witted, and unexaggerated of writers, female literature has reason to be proud of her” (qtd. in Parrish: 370). Lewes, amidst his ostensible praise for Austen, has also managed to marginalize not only her, but also literature itself. He has separated literature into male and female factions, and, while he has dipped below the surface of the flat characters, his treatment of Austen implies that she is a great artist only because, in his view, her writing remains apolitical. Further, because of his posture and the category in which he has placed her work, from his perspective, her greatness does not appear to have the same elevated meaning as “male” greatness. Like Scott, Lewes observes some special qualities in Austen’s work, but their culturally determined gazes see only a simple romantic story told with a feminine voice.

By 1870, the ironic humor in Austen’s novels is finally being recognized. Richard Simpson terms Austen’s view of life, “that of a humourist, but of a very kindly one” (qtd. in Parrish: 371). He speaks to the subtle wittiness of her work: “Hers is not a humour of the strongest and vividest kind, which awakens the indirect reminiscence of the Infinite through the

disproportion of language and imagery to the finite things which they profess to express” (372). Of her fictional individuals, he says, “However good these characters may be, it cannot be denied that they have in them much of the element of farce” (374). Here is a reviewer who appreciates her humor and speaks of her characters flatly but with a sense of witty proportion. He infers from her works, however, that she was not a very passionate writer: “Friendship, to judge from her novels, was enough for her; she did not want to exaggerate it into passionate love” (qtd. in Parrish: 371). He further denigrates her by saying, “Miss Austen, in constructing her chief characters, sometimes lets her theory run away with her” (qtd. in Parrish: 374). He has touched on the beginning development of her characters and her humor, but he has not recognized her narrative techniques at all, and Austen has again been left out on the fringe of the literary world. She has become a stoical humorist, and what she has to say has not yet achieved the importance or significance it represents today.

The multi-faceted criticism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has yielded scholarly articles about Austen’s narrative techniques, her feminist leanings, and her use of irony. Years after Simpson exhibited a distinct lack of confidence in Austen’s character management when he alluded to her “letting her theory run away with her,” Wayne Booth wrote extensively on his studies of Austen and stood strong in his support of Austen’s masterful control of her narrative. His 1961 article, “Control of Distance in Jane Austen’s *Emma*,” demonstrates the effectiveness of Austen’s narrative technique. In this piece, he speaks to her self-imposed difficulties in maintaining control of her narrative in this novel as she openly illustrates Emma’s flaws while at the same time keeping her heroine sympathetic to the reader. Booth states:

It is clear that with a general plot of this kind Jane Austen gave herself difficulties of a high order. Though Emma’s faults are comic, they constantly threaten to produce serious harm. Yet she must remain sympathetic or the reader will not wish for and delight sufficiently in her reform. Obviously, the problem with a

plot like this is to find some way to allow the reader to laugh at the mistakes committed by the heroine and at her punishment, without reducing the desire to see her reform and thus earn happiness. (401)

Booth maintains that the solution to Austen's problem of maintaining this sympathy was to use Emma herself as a kind of third-person narrator, reporting her own experience. He feels that by "showing most of the story through Emma's eyes, the author insures that we shall travel with Emma rather than stand against her" (402). On the other hand, Booth points out that we attain our sympathy for Emma not only through our interiority, but also because Austen was able to heighten that sympathy for Emma by reason of her withholding inside views of others (405). He points out that Austen most probably would have committed a fatal mistake by giving the reader any extended inside view of Jane Fairfax. Not only would Jane have taken away our sympathy for Emma, but also, according to Booth, such an interior point of view would have been fatal to the author's plans for mystery surrounding Frank Churchill. Although Booth's observations about Emma's holding and keeping the reader's commiseration through her controlled intimacy and distance of the characters make sense, it would also appear that another aspect of the reader's continuing sympathy toward Emma is Austen's negotiated balance between Emma's mistakes and her punishment. She never escapes the commission of her errors without some form of retribution, and the appropriate administration of justice to transgressors generally arouses a satisfactory response from most people, particularly where characters eminently redeemable are concerned.

While Booth's observations relate to Austen's control of the reader's interior view of certain of her characters, other modern critiques concentrate on additional devices she developed to express such an interior perspective. Particularly noticeable in her novels is Austen's cultivation of the free indirect style of writing. In their article, "'The Tittle-Tattle of Highbury':

Gossip and the Free Indirect Style in *Emma* (1990),” Casey Finch and Peter Bowen quote from a study by V. N. Voloshinov and Mikhail Bakhtin that essentially deconstructs the free indirect style:

[ . . . ] any utterance in free indirect style is treated by the narrative machinery “as an utterance belonging to *someone else*, an utterance that was originally totally independent, complete in its construction, and lying outside the given context.” From its “independent existence,” this utterance is transposed into an authorial context while retaining its own referential content and at least the rudiments of its own linguistic integrity. “Paradoxically, the free indirect style enables the representation of a seemingly private, independent subject—able to speak his or her own mind at any time—even as it guarantees public access to any character’s private thoughts. Indeed, the dual nature of each character’s interiority—at once perfectly private and absolutely open to public scrutiny—is ensured by the unnameable and unlocatable nature of the narrator’s voice. It is by thus keeping secret the source of community concern—for we can never know precisely who speaks in the free indirect style—that the novel makes public the private thoughts of individual characters. (5)

This is a thorough explanation of the complex process the reader faces as she reads *Emma*—the reader does not always know who is speaking. Finch and Bowen go on to compare Austen’s technique with her eighteenth-century predecessors. They name and expand upon the various forms of narrative those predecessors used, namely, the subjective novel, whose first-person narrator is obviously announced; and the objective novel, with its confessed narrator. Both forms of narrative supply an identifiable source of authorial authority. *Emma* falls under neither of these categories. Such a specific diviner does not exist in *Emma*, where the narrative authority of the novel is both nowhere and everywhere.

John Bender, in *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (1987), also offers a brief explanation of Austen’s innovation, which he terms a “specialized form of third-person narration, also known as *style indirect libre* and *erlebte Rede*” that he says “absorbs the narrator within an impersonal, apparently unmediated representation that creates the illusion of entry into the consciousness of fictional

characters” (177). He further implies that Fanny Burney and other female writers were able to consolidate the use of free indirect discourse and, as her contemporaries, influenced Austen in her use of it (212).

In his essay, “The Birth of Inwardness” (1998), James Wood examines the modern traits of the heroines from Austen’s novels and discusses this innovative technique. He focuses on the continuing sophistication, in each of her successive novels, of the inward thinking of Austen’s protagonists. Wood concludes that her cultivation of such inwardness was the precursor of Virginia Woolf’s and James Joyce’s stream-of-consciousness mode of expressing the thoughts of their characters. Wood begins his examination with his comparison of Austen’s heroines to modern characters since Henry James. He points out that they differ with those modern characters in that they do not change by discovering things about themselves, or what is best about themselves. Rather, each heroine is gradually allowed to see the world more clearly and discovers what is best *for* herself and for others, and more of what Wood terms the heroine’s “stable essence” is revealed to the reader, thus enabling the reader to see the character more clearly. While it seems Austen formulates Emma to become much more self-aware than Wood acknowledges, much of what Wood says in his article is relevant to this paper.

Wood points out that Austen saves this free indirect style of consciousness for only her most important characters:

The inwardness of Austen’s heroines is precisely what makes them heroic in the novels. This is measurable, because Austen maintains a hierarchy of consciousness: the people who matter think inwardly, and everyone else speaks. Or rather: the heroines speak to themselves, and everyone else speaks to each other. The heroines are the only characters whose inner thought is represented. And this speaking to oneself is often a secret conversation, which Austen almost invented a new technique, a precursor or modernist stream-of-consciousness, to represent. (26)

Wood commences his study of Austen's development of inwardness with his observation of the character of Elinor in Austen's first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*. He perceives that Austen allows Elinor to have thoughts of her own but stays inside conventional narrated thought by remaining outside Elinor. He shows, by quoting from the novel, that we do not really enter Elinor's mind:

What felt Elinor at that moment? Astonishment, that would have been as painful as it was strong, had not an immediate disbelief of the assertion attended. She turned towards Lucy in silent amazement, unable to divine the reason or object of such a declaration, and though her complexion varied, she stood firm in incredulity and felt no danger of an hysterical fit, or a swoon. (25)

He demonstrates that, in her later novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen allows us briefly to enter Elizabeth's mind with her self-conversation by again quoting: "All liveliness and goodness as she is! Her understanding excellent, her mind improved, and her manners captivating" (26). Wood perceives that, at first, Austen allows these entrances into the heroine's mind to be short-lived before the heroine's self-examination brings on a headache. However, as the novel progresses, Austen permits Elizabeth's character to begin voicing what he calls "stage soliloquies." He uses as an example Elizabeth's speech to herself after she reads the letter Darcy has written to her when he again quotes Austen, this time from *Pride and Prejudice*:

"How despicably have I acted!" she cried.—"I, who have prided myself on my discernment!—I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blameable distrust [. . .]" (28)

Wood further describes Austen's development and evolvement of her "stage soliloquy" style:

Austen uses it with ever greater sophistication, dispensing with quotation marks, and blending the heroine's soliloquy with her own third-person narration, so that she is able to move in and out of a character as she pleases. [. . .] In her later novels, Austen tends to alternate free indirect style with a first-person stream-of-

consciousness [. . .] Austen's heroines are separate, different from everyone else in the novels by virtue of their ability to speak to themselves. (28)

He tracks the evolution of Austen's unique narrative technique and comments establishing that, by the time she gets to *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, Austen uses this technique with greater refinement—she dispenses with quotation marks and the staginess of the speeches, making them more conversational, and she blends the heroine's soliloquy with her own third-person narration so that she is able to move in and out of a character as she pleases. The heroine almost seems to be writing the novel. *Emma*, as the novel's name implies and Austen's style declares, *is* the most important character in the novel, and Wood implies this novel is filled with her self-disputations. Because, in her later novels, Austen tends to alternate free indirect style with a first-person stream-of-consciousness, moving rapidly between different modes, Wood concludes that she is a much more radical novelist than Flaubert (27). He asserts that she has endowed her characters with consciousness, and he contends that the biggest modern difference between Austen and Woolf or Joyce is the manner in which Austen's heroines tend to conceal this solitary thought when off by themselves, while Woolf's and Joyce's characters need go nowhere in particular to think.

Also focusing on Austen's narrative techniques, Joe Bray examines even more closely her expression of her characters' consciousness and tracks the blurring movement of Austen as the narrator and Austen as voice of her characters. In his article "The Source of 'Dramatized Consciousness': Richardson, Austen, and Stylistic Influence" (2001), he analyzes Austen's method of "slippage inside a character's consciousness," of allowing *Emma*'s narrative to slip out of Austen's and into Emma's consciousness (19). He explains that such a style of narration "typically involves a combination of language 'colored by a particular character's point of view' with the third person and past tense associated with indirect report, or the narrator's perspective"



(19). As mentioned earlier, it can clearly be seen from reading the novel that, in this case, Emma has been chosen as the particular character from which to emanate the point of view. According to Bray's analytical perspective of the seamless alternation between narrator and character, "the mingling of the narrator's voice with the character's consciousness allows the possibility of an alternative, ironic, perspective on her thoughts" (20).

In his essay, "Austen's *Emma*" (2001), John K. Hale provides a more thorough examination of this alternative, ironic perspective on Emma's thoughts. Hale begins his analysis with his observation that Austen's free indirect style aids in her use of irony by moving the reader constantly between the author's mind and her characters' minds. He concentrates on a single passage, taken from Chapter 27, and analyzes the lines to determine at which point in the passage the irony is realized. The paragraph on which he focuses concerns the fact that Emma did "not repent her condescension in going to the Coles." He then considers the language of each line of the passage to show Emma being held up to what he terms "delicious ridicule." His perception of the first line is that Emma is dreaming disproportionately to what she has actually just done. However, the second line: "The visit afforded her many pleasant recollections the next day; and all that she might be supposed to have lost on the side of dignified seclusion must be amply repaid in the splendour of popularity," he deems activates our sense of excess in her. He questions who might be doing the supposing, besides herself, while he asserts the auxiliary verbs are pushing us inside her self-centered reflections. He determines that the third sentence, which initiates a movement of thought, assures us of the irony: "She must have delighted the Coles—worthy people, who deserved to be made happy!—and left a name behind her which would not soon die away." According to Hale, "the repetition of 'must' early in the new sentence impinges rapidly" (124) and Austen has distorted the word order, from "would not die

away soon” into “would not soon die away.” He asserts that such distortion secures both emphasis for “not soon” and the “onomatopoeic sound and rhythm of the last two words (124).” In any case, Austen’s ironic depiction of Emma’s sometimes excessive sense of self-importance tempered with her often-humbling experiences is another way Austen allows the reader to sympathize, and empathize, with Emma.

Finch and Bowen connect the gossip ever present in *Emma* with Austen’s free indirect style. Although the topic of gossip is not the focus of interest for this paper, much of what these authors say concerning Austen’s narrative technique is significant to it. This is particularly so as it concerns Austen’s use of tattle to reflect not only the opinions of various individuals, but also those of collective society, in this case, the community in which Emma lives. Emma’s realization of the importance of her relationship to her society is one of the ways she matures. In their article, Finch and Bowen list the ways the free indirect style is used in *Emma*:

The free indirect style is variously deployed throughout the novel: sometimes it simply reports the actual speeches of characters; sometimes it eavesdrops, as it were, on the internal ruminations of individual citizens in order either to satirize or approve them; and other times it ventriloquizes the voice of the community as a whole (or at least its respectable citizens). (14)

According to Finch’s and Bowen’s theory on the way that Austen uses her narrative style to reflect both individual and collective opinion, she disseminates her narrative authority among her characters:

[. . .] then equally the novel’s deployment of free indirect style (which Austen first brought to fruition) has the effect of naturalizing *narrative* authority by disseminating it among the characters [. . .] so the development in Austen’s hands of free indirect style marks a crucial moment in the history of novelistic technique in which narrative authority is seemingly elided, ostensibly giving way to what Flaubert called a transparent style in which the author is “everywhere felt, but never seen.” (3)

Austen is thus able to give the reader the authorial inside story on her protagonist without appearing to be there at all—theoretically, most of the time it is not Austen revealing Emma's thoughts, it is Emma herself telling us the story. When it is time to state something that Emma cannot possibly know, Austen moves back to the omniscient narrator's voice, whose identification or gender we do not really know but can only guess. Although narrative studies indicate the omniscient narrator's voice as seemingly unidentifiable, feminist studies take a more definitive stance in denominating the female narrator and the feminine flavor of the narrative. Unlike Scott and Lewes, who implied that Austen's writing was laudable *in spite* of its womanly perspective, feminists examine how Austen's body of work is praiseworthy *because* of the level of its female consciousness.

One aspect of the feminist perspective of Austen and her works is found in Denise Kohn's "Reading *Emma* as a Lesson on 'Ladyhood': A Study in the Domestic Bildungsroman" (1995). In this article, Kohn terms *Emma* as a *bildungsroman*, a novel of development, dealing with a woman's maturation, with the protagonist's increasing awareness of herself in relationship to the bigger world. She makes several good points regarding a feminist reading of Austen's independent heroine in this novel. She opens her essay by asserting that, in order for the modern reader to read *Emma* without having it become problematical, the reader must meet Austen halfway and "approach the novel as a lesson on manners—more specifically—as a lesson on 'ladyhood'" (45). The reader, accordingly, must alter her frame of reference from 2003 to late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when the population of Austen's readers would have been concerned with manners and behavior, especially with the proper deportment of a lady as it related to emulating the behavior of upper class women. Kohn observes that, from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, the "term 'lady' moved from one that

described only class to one that described behavior” (45). Therefore, such lessons in conduct, which would, in the late eighteenth century, have been directed toward women of the higher ranks of society, came, with the onslaught of the rising middle class and declining upper class (and resultant social status depending not only on money but also on manners), to be directed toward a broader audience.

However, this novel is not *really* about manners. Rather, Kohn believes that Austen used the interest people would have had in the everyday behavior and manners of everyday people of the period to reverse the role of the typical passive, demure “lady” of the time in *Emma*: “One of Austen’s greatest achievements in *Emma* is that she writes a novel of education—a bildungsroman—that instructs her readers to deconstruct the pervasive images of “ladyhood” created by her period’s conduct-book writers” (45). According to Kohn, Austen was able to paint the portrait of a heroine who, though labeled a lady at the beginning of the story, does not really become one until she gains a certain self-awareness and has learned to balance her power and decorum. Thus, with a developing feminine enlightenment, Emma fulfills her role as the protagonist who becomes aware of herself in relationship to the bigger world, even though, in truth, her bigger world is probably Highbury. The lady Emma becomes, however, does not conform to the typical passive and unassuming definition of the contemporary lady of the time. Rather, she becomes what Kohn thought Austen felt to be an ideal lady, what Kohn terms a “celebration of female individualism and power [. . .] she is strong and assertive but is also more caring and sensitive to others” (46).

Kohn asserts that, while Emma has been strong-willed and self-confident from the beginning of the novel, by the end of the story, she has learned to temper these attributes with a newly learned, expansive self-knowledge. This insight enables her to see her connection as an

individual to her place in the community. Kohn sometimes seems to vacillate between contending that women are strong and implying that women still have a “place” in life. However, Kohn does also point out that Austen adds a twist to the conventional marriage plot when she has Knightley abdicate his seat in his place of authority to move into Emma’s house, where she has reigned supreme for many years. This unorthodox marital angle to an otherwise orthodox result correlates with Kohn’s assertion that Emma is a lady who has learned to live within her society without compromising herself.

Claudia L. Johnson asserts that Austen progressed further in her writing than merely asserting female worth through her fiction. In *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* (1988), she concentrates on Austen’s use of fiction to strengthen the position of women in society as they began to jockey for position in the male world. Johnson begins her introduction to this book by claiming that many of the misleading premises that nineteenth-century critics and reviewers introduced are still with us today. She especially blames R. W. Chapman for having incorrectly influenced two generations of readers with his *Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen*, which she lambastes as being “hardly models of rigorous textual scholarship, and to all appearances they do not intend to be” (xvi). According to Johnson:

To Chapman, Austen is in the canon not because of her social vision or even because of her formidable artistry, but rather because she had the good fortune to be able and the good taste to be willing to record the elegant manners of her time. And so, with an inexorable circularity, Chapman’s edition of Austen creates the author it presumed, and the history it desired. (xvii)

Johnson concludes that Austen has been politicized, fashioned by male hands—Chapman’s—into what she was not; Chapman implied that because manners were very important during Austen’s time, and her novels tend to include manners, that this, then, must be the primary substance of her novels. If Johnson is correct in her assumption, then Chapman’s

views are reminiscent of Sir Walter Scott's earlier implications about Austen's novels. Johnson further asserts that modern scholars have been unable to justify Austen's inherited place in the canon because they have not reconsidered the education and attitudes available to Austen as a woman. She contends that historical scholars since Chapman have marginalized Austen, claiming that by "affiliating Austen with important male authors or with pressing social and political issues, they deny her any direct access or pondered relation to them" (xvii). Most striking in this article is her description of the debate during Austen's time over the moral lives of women compared to those of men, to which she says, "Years ago, Lionel Trilling observed that Emma Woodhouse was remarkable for having 'a moral life as a man has a moral life'" (xxiii). Johnson contextually puts into perspective Trilling's remarks over Emma's moral life:

But in fact, the extent to which women have or ought to have moral lives in the same way men have moral lives was very hotly and accessibly debated in Austen's time, as were other issues pertaining to female sexuality in particular and sexual difference in general. In endowing attractive female characters like Emma Woodhouse [. . .] with rich and unapologetic senses of self-consequence, Austen defies every dictum about female propriety and deference propounded in the sermons and conduct books which have been thought to shape her opinions on all important matters. (xxiii)

Finally, Johnson credits the Revolution in France with the rise of the novel of crisis in England, in which she indicates the "structures of daily life are called into doubt" (26). Of Austen's novels, she says:

The novels of Jane Austen focus on the discourse rather than the representation of politics. Alluding only rarely to actual events outside her famously placid villages, Austen does not, it is true, explicitly invoke the French Revolution [. . .] Austen may slacken the desperate tempos employed by her more strenuously politicized counterparts, but she shares their artistic strategies and their commitment to uncovering the ideological underpinnings of cultural myths. (27)

Throughout her article, Johnson demonstrates her view that Jane Austen used the means at her disposal to reveal the gender-related inconsistencies in the society of her time through her handling of female characterization.

Sarah R. Morrison further expands upon Austen's female characterization in "Of Woman Borne: Male Experience and Feminine Truth in Jane Austen's Novels" (1994). Morrison begins her essay by dividing critics of Austen's novels into two camps: they either "view her as a conservative holding the values of the landed gentry in the late eighteenth century or as a subversive who undercuts the very premises upon which English society rests" (337). In exploring Austen's extended development of her female protagonists as compared to the limited development of her male figures, Morrison concludes that men are of secondary importance to Austen's novels. In Austen's novels, the primary importance of the male experience is to confirm what Morrison terms "feminine" truth, which, for Austen, was a "universal truth reflected more clearly in women's experience" (342). Morrison further theorizes that Austen establishes the centrality of women's experience by deliberately and consistently marginalizing the male experience. However, Austen includes the male perspective in her novels by predicating her work on the belief that the domestic circle of family, friends and neighbors is of predominant importance to both men and women. Taking what she knew of human behavior to make life realistic, Austen then authored *Emma* with a female protagonist exhibiting masculine traits in the midst of the conduct of the time.

Christine Roulston provides a more expansive observation of the experiential movement of the male from the outside to the inside in "Discourse, Gender, and Gossip: Some Reflections on Bakhtin and *Emma*" (1996). Here, Roulston discusses the sentimental style of writing, into which category she places Austen's works. She attempts to establish a dialectical relationship

between Bakhtin's and Austen's writing and examine what each privileges in terms of narrative conflict. She does this by analyzing a specific passage from Bakhtin in relation to Austen's *Emma*. According to Roulston, Bakhtin praises certain aspects of the sentimental style of writing, namely, its attention to detail, the everyday, the mundane, which possesses a singular mimetic force and which lacks the abstracting effects of heroic epic; he proffers the idea that the shift from the epic to the sentimental also involves a movement from the public to the private and "requires a shrinkage or narrowing-down of both space and time" (41). Roulston feels that Bakhtin considers the inner space of the sentimental novel to be constructed in terms of feminine ideology, and the only way that the male subject enters is to move from the outside to the inside. Bakhtin has, therefore, created a genderized perspective of the public and the private realms. Roulston goes on to assert that Bakhtin, through his critique of the sentimental "feminine" novel, marginalizes it by refusing to acknowledge it as a referent for the representation of the real. She points out that the notion of class "is dependent on the recognition of a group of people functioning as a politicized community and sharing the same socioeconomic interests," thereby defining class as a "public, not a private, concept" (61).

Roulston further asserts that, while V. N. Volosinov argues that language is "the site through which the class struggle is articulated," it can be debated that language can function, and, in *Emma*, does function, as the arena for the gender struggle (43). Although the feminine and masculine subjects use the same language in this novel, Roulston rationalizes that it is marked in a different way. She demonstrates this by observing that speech is overtly differentiated by the gender of the speaker, that female speech is called "gossip" while male speech is identified as "conversation." She provides the following example:

At the close of the novel, after one of the many weddings that take place, Mr. Knightley informs Emma that "this is all that I can relate of the how, where, and



when—your friend Harriet will make a much longer history when you see her.—She will give you all the minute particulars, which only woman’s language can make interesting.—In our communications, we deal only in the great.” (44)

Roulston further contends that such a blatant statement not only acts to define the disparity between male and female language, but also functions to demarcate the role of the male protagonist as proffering the difference between “truth and fiction and between conversation and gossip” (44). Roulston notes that this role becomes blurred because it is “being repeatedly transgressed by a kind of linguistic cross-dressing, where men talk like women and vice versa. It is precisely this process that engenders the dialogic structure of the novel, in which language can never limit itself to simply one voice” (44).

Roulston then considers that *Emma* effectively engages Bakhtin’s reading of the sentimental novel because, in *Emma*, class and gender are no longer strictly oppositional; instead, it provides us with “a dialogic narrative of competing discourses involving complex aspects of class and gender, a narrative that, in terms of structure, provides us with a novel that fits into Bakhtin’s conception of novelistic discourse, containing multiple voices which engage and confront one another” (44). She goes on to suggest that *Emma* is presented as an “inverted world that has to be put back in its proper place” (45). Roulston provides as an example of this inversion the characters of Emma and her father, who function in reversed roles—Mr. Woodhouse is depicted with characteristics of a woman, while Emma peculiarly possesses many masculine traits and demonstrates a “male” authority over her household. Roulston suggests that such a retrogradation threatens the social stability of the entire community, and, as it relates to the narrative of the story, Emma’s inverted place of control in the novel signifies her as a character who “generates, rather than being determined by, narrative action” (45).

Like Roulston, Kathy Mezei also explores the ambiguous gender roles in *Emma* in her article, “Free Indirect Discourse, Gender, and Authority in *Emma*, *Howards End*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*” (1996). She speaks to the reader’s active role in deciphering who the narrator in Austen’s books might be, as well as Austen’s use of her characters to focalize the action in the novel. She also differentiates between free indirect discourse and focalization, citing free indirect discourse as “an instance of reported discourse, an utterance, whereas focalization is a representation of a character’s perspective, of what that character sees” (70). She terms these focalizers generally as character-focalizers, and the female protagonists as heroine-focalizers. Mezei maintains that there is a “shifting of agency between narrator and focalizer” in the novel as well as an “inquiry into the societal models of male and female positions” (71). She has much to say relating to the characters’ emergence from the text and what she terms “the shifting, viscous relations between author, implied author, narrator, and these heroine-focalizers” and what she further describes as this “confusion of voices, confusion of gender” (66). Interestingly, Mezei sees the blur between the author and narrator not only as a small-scale struggle between narrators and character-focalizers for control of the text, but also as a larger-scale conflict between “conventional gender roles and of the resistance to traditional narrative authority in which a masterly male subject speaks for and over the female object of his gaze” (66). Mezei posits the location for this travail at the feet of free indirect discourse:

The site for this textual battle between author, narrator, and character-focalizer and between fixed and fluctuating gender roles is the narrative device “free indirect discourse” (hereafter FID). The undecidability inherent in the structure of FID makes it an appropriate space for the complicated interchange between author, narrator, character-focalizer, and reader. Its structural indeterminacy shelters and accentuates forms of gender indeterminacy. (67)

Mezei deconstructs the concept of free indirect discourse by trisecting the term into the significance of its three fundamental parts. She signifies that “free” indicates the narrator “has

delegated a certain authority and equality to the character and has *deliberately* repressed overt markers of his or her control.” She terms the significance of “indirect” as implying “the indeterminacy of this discourse, an ‘indirect’ discourse into which the reader must insert him/herself and try to determine the positions of narrator and character-focalizer.” Finally, she defines the significance of “discourse” as embracing “both form and content, both speech and writing; it includes monologue, conversation, dialogue, dialect; it is the very substance of dialogue” (68). She applies her deconstruction to the narrative by pointing out the operation of the ambiguous relationship between the narrator and character-focalizer. This results in “what Bakhtin described as double-voiced discourse; the hierarchy in which a narrator ‘controls’ the discourse of the character-focalizer is disrupted” (68). Mezei then explains how the ambiguity also encompasses gender roles in the narrative by quoting from Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*:

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (71)

Mezei further explicates the shift in the ironic distance between the narrator and Emma as the novel progresses, noting that as Emma matures and gains the narrator’s approval, she also earns the reader’s approval, and the ironic distance shrinks. Mezei finally maintains that Austen, whom she deems the progenitor of FID, uses that narrative technique, along with irony, as an “effective space in which questions of gender, authority, and propriety can be subtly interrogated” (75).

This overview of criticism on Austen has revealed the important connections between authorial intent, narrative viewpoint, and feminine vocalization. Not unexpectedly, critics from Austen’s time slotted her novels into the romantic novel genre and viewed her work strictly in

that sense; later nineteenth century critics noted humor as an additional dimension to her writing. By the twentieth and twenty-first century, Austen was being reappraised in light of the many subtle features she employs to develop both her stories and her characters. Modern scholars extensively analyze Austen's control of her narrative and her use of Emma as a kind of third-person narrator, reporting her own experience, thereby engendering sympathy at critical moments. Some explore Austen's free indirect style of consciousness to reveal her important characters' inner thoughts, both to themselves and to the reader; others examine her technique of mingling the narrator's voice with the character's consciousness. Various scholars evaluate the way Austen's free indirect style aids in her use of irony, while some explore the opportunity it affords Austen in reflecting both individual and collective opinion via the gossip in the novel. Certain scholars view *Emma* as a female *bildungsroman*, and others observe Austen's awareness of feminine equality of intellect and disadvantageous place in society. One surveys Austen's use of fiction to strengthen the position of women in society, while another investigates Austen's feminine truth, universalized. A number of scholars study Austen's use of the sentimental novel to exemplify the public and private concept of class and gender. Still others examine Austen's use of free indirect discourse, gender roles, and narrative authority as expressed through heroine-focalizers.

Chapter Three will more closely examine *Emma* to demonstrate Austen's use of consciousness and irony to portray a compassionate, intelligent, sensitive female character not in keeping with the norm, a vocalizer of the dawning feminine consciousness.

### Chapter 3: *Emma*—Observation of the World from Within, and Without, the Feminine Sphere

#### *Austen's Feminine/Feminist View*

*Emma* (1816), as the opening words of the novel indicate, is the tale of a rich, beautiful young woman: “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence, and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her” (27). Emma is the daughter of Mr. Woodhouse, an affluent, somewhat obtuse widower who allows his assertive, intelligent daughter to run his household, see to his comforts, and direct his life. Although mutually affectionate, they operate on two different planes. She is energetic, inquisitive, bright and sharp-witted. He is a hypochondriac much dependent upon his apothecary, Mr. Perry, with little interest in anything beyond his health or much farther afoot than his home, Hartfield, or his village, Highbury. Emma’s sister Isabella is much like her father. She is married to Mr. John Knightley, the brother of Emma’s best friend, Mr. Knightley, who is her verbal sparring partner and her intellectual equal. Mrs. and Miss Bates, with their niece, Jane Fairfax, who are Highbury neighbors, represent those members of society sliding down into poverty. The Westons, also neighbors, serve as those members making the trip up the social ladder as their financial situation improves through trade; Mrs. Weston, Emma’s former governess, has an emotional attachment to the family. Frank Churchill, Mr. Weston’s son from a previous marriage, exhibits that ease of upper-class position accompanying people whose wealth has been long-standing. Although the plot line of the novel revolves around Emma’s disastrous matchmaking attempts and the conduct of Highbury society, the significance of the story lies in Austen’s use of narrative techniques, her

full evolution of a female character, and her exemplification of a feminine perspective through the view of her protagonist, Emma.

In analyzing Austen's portrayal of this ever-evolving, non-conventional awakening female character, perhaps the best place to start is on the outside, the exterior circumstances. The reader might move first, as Bakhtin implied, from the outside to the inside before beginning the trip into Austen's, and her characters' minds. If commencing with exterior observations, before becoming intimate with Emma, the reader might contemplate Austen's hints at Emma's beginning stages of growth. An initial observation to be made is how Austen initiates her presentation of Emma, from her authorial view, as an unfinished character, in the stages of evolution, beginning to awaken to an increasing awareness of the world around her and to her role in that world. To demonstrate Emma's incompleteness and evolving nature, Austen initially presents Emma as one who is constantly leaving things unfinished. During his discussion of her with Mrs. Weston, Mr. Knightley ironically, though affectionately, points out this particular flaw in Emma as it relates to her reading plans:

Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old. I have seen a great many lists of her drawing up at various times of books that she meant to read regularly through—and very good lists they were—very well chosen and very neatly arranged—sometimes alphabetically and sometimes by some other rule. The list she drew up when she was fourteen—I remember thinking it did her judgement so much credit that I preserved it some time; and I dare say she may have made out a very good list now. But I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to anything requiring industry and patience and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding. (53)

In this passage, Austen, through Mr. Knightley, has cleverly pointed out that Emma, while having good taste in reading material and formulating elaborate lists in contemplation for how the reading should be carried out, does not follow through with her intentions and actually read the books she has chosen. Austen has, through the irony in these lines, tempered Mr.

Knightley's criticism of Emma by balancing her negative aspects with positive ones. Since Emma appears to hold in high regard Mr. Knightley's judgment of her behavior throughout much of the novel, the reader can also notice this sense of incompleteness in Emma's character without losing respect or affection for her. Knightley's indulgent, satiric praise of Emma's discrimination in her choices of good books for someone else to read in the list she drew up at fourteen considerably softens his criticism of her and also helps to reveal his feelings for her to the reader. After reading the passage, we have the sense that Emma starts much but finishes little; however, our sympathy for her has not really waned, because Mr. Knightley has not used harsh, biting wit to criticize, but rather subtle, tolerantly humorous irony. We further learn that Emma acts this way not only with reading lists, but also with almost every aspect of her life. A foremost demonstration is the fact that she has learned to play the pianoforte and sing only just enough to play passably well. However, she is able to use a sudden self-enlightenment of this characteristic in herself, which she does not realize until later in the novel, as a step in her growth to self-awareness: "She did unfeignedly and unequivocally regret the inferiority of her own playing and singing. She did most heartily grieve over the idleness of her childhood [ . . . ]" (209).

More symbolically indicative of Emma's seeming inability to complete a project is her ineptitude at matchmaking; her efforts, though well meant, seem bent toward inconclusiveness from the outset. Emma's focus in finding a suitable mate for Harriet falls first on Mr. Elton, who is totally inappropriate for Harriet, given her uncertain parentage, lack of social prestige with which Mr. Elton is so obviously concerned, and genuine absence of grasping ambition to ascend the class ladder. Emma's next prospect for Harriet, Frank Churchill, is an equally infelicitous choice for different reasons, not even including the later realized and most obvious—he is

already taken. It almost seems as if Emma purposefully, if unconsciously, embarks on endeavors doomed to failure. However, none of her efforts are ever for self-gain, and she possesses and demonstrates so much good will and makes such an effort to be helpful to others that one cannot help but soften toward this character.

A more tangible example clearly exhibiting Emma's propensity for starting, but not completing projects, is Austen's description of Emma's portfolio of artwork. This subject is introduced because Emma contemplates painting Harriet's portrait in order to forward her plan to pair Harriet with Mr. Elton:

Emma wished to go to work directly and therefore produced the portfolio containing her various attempts at portraits, for not one of them had ever been finished, that they might decide together on the best size for Harriet. Her many beginnings were displayed. Miniatures, half-lengths, whole-lengths, pencil, crayon, and water-colours had been all tried in turn. (58)

However, in this instance, Austen, from the outside, provides us with a foreshadowing of Emma's maturation when Emma, indeed, finishes Harriet's likeness, the first portrait she has *ever* finished. She does so early enough in the novel that the reader has hopes for Emma, the unresolved and underachieving character, who has, after twenty-one years, actually carried a project to completion. Austen has thus afforded the reader evidence of a positive step in the process of Emma's evolution while placing her in a sympathetic posture. Austen uses the reader's resulting inclination for compassion toward Emma throughout the novel to place her growth and self-awareness in the best possible light.

A different observation about Emma's character comes with Austen's narrative placement of Emma against characters who are mentally diametrically opposed to her throughout the story; these continually help to distinguish Emma. Austen allows the reader to sense the difference between Emma's characteristics and those of others around her through vivid



descriptions and interior narrative consciousness. Early in the novel, Austen ironically provides the reader with a clear indication of the nature of Emma's father:

The evil of the actual disparity in their ages (and Mr. Woodhouse had not married early) was much increased by his constitution and habits; for having been a valetudinarian all his life, without activity of mind or body, he was a much older man in ways than in years; and though everywhere beloved for the friendliness of his heart and his amiable temper, his talents could not have recommended him at any time. (29)

In this passage, Austen has informed the reader that, although Mr. Woodhouse is friendly and good-hearted, he will not be accused of being brilliant or talented. In a later passage, as Mr. Woodhouse was remembering the recent wedding of Emma's governess, Miss Taylor, to Mr. Weston, she further expands on his fastidiousness and rigid views regarding the health and diet, and particularly the unwholesomeness of wedding cake:

Mr. Perry was an intelligent, gentlemanlike man, whose frequent visits were one of the comforts of Mr. Woodhouse's life; and upon being applied to, he could not but acknowledge (though it seemed rather against the bias of inclination) that wedding-cake might certainly disagree with many—perhaps with most people—unless taken moderately. With such an opinion in confirmation of his own, Mr. Woodhouse hoped to influence every visitor of the new-married pair; but still the cake was eaten; and there was not rest for his benevolent nerves till it was all gone. There was a strange rumour in Highbury of all the little Perrys being seen with a slice of Mrs. Weston's wedding-cake in their hands; but Mr. Woodhouse would never believe it. (38-39)

Emma's older sister, Isabella, is outwardly defined in rather dense, Mr. Woodhouse-fashion:

She was not a woman of strong understanding or any quickness; and with this resemblance of her father, she inherited also much of his constitution; was delicate in her own health, overcareful of that of her children, had many fears and many nerves, and was as fond of her own Mr. Wingfield in town as her father could be of Mr. Perry. (98)

In a single passage Austen has described both father and daughter as being polarized from Emma. Austen further emphasizes Emma's polarity from Isabella and Mr. Woodhouse

through her use of another exterior technique. This, as Hale has mentioned, is Austen's sophisticated use of irony to invoke humor in *Emma*. Austen demonstrates the difference between Emma and her sister and father with one of her father's several discussions regarding the merits of gruel:

"My poor, dear Isabella," said he, fondly taking her hand and interrupting, for a few moments, her busy labours for some one of her five children, "how long it is, how terribly long since you were here! And how tired you must be after your journey! You must go to bed early, my dear—and I recommend a little gruel to you before you go. You and I will have a nice basin of gruel together. My dear Emma, suppose we all have a little gruel."

Emma could not suppose any such thing, knowing, as she did, that both the Mr. Knightleys were as unpersuadable on that article as herself; and two basins only were ordered. After a little more discourse in praise of gruel, with some wondering at its not being taken every evening by everybody, he proceeded to say with an air of grave reflection [. . .] (105)

Austen's prior description of Isabella and Mr. Woodhouse enables her to cleverly and ironically make it very easy to identify the "some" who were "wondering" at gruel "not being taken every evening by everybody" as Isabella and Mr. Woodhouse. Austen also marks the distance between Emma and Isabella when she describes Emma's inward view of Isabella's relationship with her husband, Mr. John Knightley, as well as Emma's feelings toward him:

He had all the clearness and quickness of mind which she [Isabella] wanted, and he could sometimes act an ungracious or say a severe thing. He was not a great favourite with his fair sister-in-law. Nothing wrong in him escaped her. She was quick in feeling the little injuries to Isabella which Isabella never felt herself. (99)

The outward description of Isabella and movement into narrator's expression of Emma's feelings toward her brother-in-law demonstrate the contrast between Emma and Isabella. Also, because the narrator, and not Emma, has conveyed this information regarding John Knightley's attributes, the reader has no reason to doubt he possesses these negative characteristics. In these lines, Emma is not only displayed as the more intelligent and perceptive of the two siblings, but

this description has also shown her in a protective, sisterly light, making her a sympathetic character. They also distinguish Emma from Isabella in another sort of role reversal; it is usually the older child that protects the younger one. This movement from the exterior to the interior of Emma's character places Emma in a kind light and reveals her better traits—it appears to be a statement made by the narrator, but the narrator would not know how hurt Emma feels when her sister is insulted by her husband. This movement also demonstrates the textual interplay Austen is able to evoke between the reader and the text.

Much of Austen's ability to evoke our sympathy for Emma depends, in fact, on the reader's relationship to the text. Patrocínio Schweickart, in "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading," speaks to a relational development between the reader and the text:

In the dialectic of communication informing the relationship between the feminist reader and the female author/text, the central issue is not of control or partition, but of managing the contradictory implications of the desire for relationship (one must maintain a minimal distance from the other) and the desire for intimacy, up to and including a symbiotic merger with the other. (209)

One way, then, that Austen enables a relational development between the reader and the text in *Emma* is to provide the reader with an expanding intimacy with a woman who continues to become more self-aware. Through various narrative techniques, Austen is able to posit Emma in a dichotomous role as a strong-willed, independently thinking woman while concomitantly making her a believable, likeable person. She also allows the reader to connect to Emma on a personal level through the knowledge the reader is able to glean from Emma herself. The knowledge the reader obtains about Emma, however, is also obtained through the narrator because much of what the reader learns is not information Emma would willingly impart to another on her own.

Inviting such a connection between reader and text would have been challenging for any writer. One must remember, however, that Austen and her contemporaries were continuing to break new ground by entering a profession traditionally dominated by males and just then beginning to attract female readers and writers. Her novels, while seemingly about everyday life were also allowing the reader a glimpse into the consciousness of her main characters, thus permitting the reader to develop a relationship with the text. Through her method of free indirect style of consciousness, a narrative technique used extensively in her later novels, Austen allows us as readers to see what Emma is seeing, to judge (or misjudge) events through her eyes, and to sense what she is feeling, especially during those times she is feeling shame or self-disapprobation. We are able to connect with her by paralleling her feelings to similar feelings of our own. The reader is able to perceive Emma's feelings even, or perhaps, especially, when Austen is transitioning from the voice of the narrator to that of Emma's.

One of the narrative techniques Austen uses to afford the reader this perspective is her shifting of consciousness. Austen, as Wood has inferred, often alternates the passages in this novel between the narrator and the voice of Emma. She quite often starts out with the voice of what seems like an objective, implied author, after which she, apparently without effort, slips into the mind of the character and into her voice. As we shift from the author's viewpoint to Emma's, we become quite intimate with Emma, and we know the pangs of self-recrimination and come to the realization, concurrently with Emma, that she has erred, allowing us to feel sympathy for and sometimes empathize with her. Austen is able to induce this effect, even when Emma has committed painful mistakes and has caused others suffering, however unintentional. An example of Emma's self-flagellation occurs after she has discovered her miscalculation about

Mr. Elton's feelings for Harriet. As one might guess, Austen shifts from outside narrator to Emma's consciousness:

The hair was curled and the maid sent away and Emma sat down to think and be miserable. It was a wretched business indeed. Such an overthrow of everything she had been wishing for. Such a development of everything most unwelcome! Such a blow for Harriet! That was the worst of all. Every part of it brought pain and humiliation of some sort or other; but compared with the evil to Harriet, all was light; and she would gladly have submitted to feel yet more mistaken, more in error, more disgraced by misjudgement than she actually was could the effects of her blunders have been confined to herself. "If I had not persuaded Harriet into liking the man, I could have borne anything. He might have doubled his presumption to me—but poor Harriet!" (131-132)

The shift in consciousness and free indirect style has allowed us first to picture Emma after she has finished a nightly ritual and then to feel Emma's contrition for having allowed Harriet to be hurt, as well as her chagrin at being the source of it. This is also an instance where Emma gains both the narrator's and reader's approval, as Mezei observed. Each recognition by Emma of a wrong or misstep committed, as well as a heightened sense of accountability for her actions and genuine comprehension of the painful effects of these actions on others, is another step in the evolution of a female character, for Emma and the reader.

Another of Austen's shifts from outside narrator, to Harriet speaking, to Emma's consciousness occurs after Harriet has divulged to Emma that she is in love with Mr. Knightley:

She paused a few moments. Emma could not speak. "I do not wonder, Miss Woodhouse," she resumed, "that you should feel a great difference between the two, as to me or as to anybody. You must think one five hundred million times more above me than the other. But I hope, Miss Woodhouse, that supposing—that if—strange as it may appear—But you know they were your own words, that *more* wonderful things had happened; matches of *greater* disparity had taken place than between Mr. Frank Churchill and me; and, therefore, it seems as if such a thing even as this may have occurred before—and if I should be so fortunate, beyond expression, as to—if Mr. Knightley should really—if *he* does not mind the disparity, I hope, dear Miss Woodhouse, you will not set yourself against it and try to put difficulties in the way. But you are too good for that, I am sure." Harriet was standing at one of the windows. Emma turned round to look at her in consternation and hastily said, "Have you any idea of Mr. Knightley's

returning your affection?" "Yes," replied Harriet modestly but not fearfully. "I must say that I have." Emma's eyes were instantly withdrawn; and she sat silently meditating in a fixed attitude for a few minutes. A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like hers, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress; she touched, she admitted, she acknowledged, the whole truth. Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley than with Frank Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet's having some hope of a return? It darted through her with the speed of an arrow that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself! (350-351)

Austen has in these lines not only allowed Harriet to turn Emma's own words against her, she has also moved from the observant outsider to Harriet's words to Emma's interiority, from the outside to the inside. She has done so casually and believably, allowing Emma to reveal her feelings to the reader, while at the same time revealing them to herself. We, as readers may have previously guessed that Emma feels more for Knightley than she has let on. However, due to Austen's mind-shifting narrative technique, we still feel, with Emma, her sudden surprise at the moment of self-revelation. We travel with her, stepping in from the outside, during the stages of her self-revelation.

There are many instances where our access to Emma's feelings allows us to experience an inordinate amount of sympathy for her, particularly when we share her self-recriminations and, as Booth said, stand with her. Our sympathy for Emma, while it does not cascade forward, is mildly aroused when Emma works her way up to a moment of circular self-revelation and enlightenment about Mr. Elton's internal make-up, after he has tried to make love to her:

How could she have been so deceived! He protested that he had never thought seriously of Harriet—never! She looked back as well as she could, but it was all confused. She had taken up the idea, she supposed, and made everything bend to it. [. . .] If *she* had so misinterpreted his feelings, she had little right to wonder that *he*, with self-interest to blind him, should have mistaken hers. [. . .] The first error, and the worst, lay at her door [. . .] and she went to bed at last with nothing settled but the conviction of her having blundered most dreadfully. (132-134)

In the space of a couple of pages, Austen has taken Emma from blaming Mr. Elton to censuring herself. She begins her rationalization by accusing Mr. Elton in her mind of only being interested in her in order to marry well, berating him for having the insolence of supposing “himself her equal in connexion or mind!” (133). She oscillates back and forth between whose fault it *might be*, until she finally admits to herself that in this case self reproach is in order. She admits to herself that she took an idea and “made everything bend to it.”

A more dramatic example of Emma’s awareness that she has caused someone pain is the Box Hill scene, after Emma has thoughtlessly let slip a cruel remark to Miss Bates, and has been confronted by Mr. Knightley with her unkindness:

While they talked they were advancing towards the carriage; it was ready; and before she could speak again, he had handed her in. He had misinterpreted the feelings which had kept her face averted and her tongue motionless. They were combined only of anger against herself, mortification, and deep concern. She had not been able to speak, and on entering the carriage, sunk back for a moment overcome; then, reproaching herself for having taken no leave, making no acknowledgement, parting in apparent sullenness, she looked out with voice and hand eager to show a difference; but it was just too late. He had turned away, the horses were in motion. She continued to look back, but in vain; and soon, with what appeared unusual speed, they were half-way down the hill and everything left far behind. She was vexed beyond what could have been expressed—almost beyond what she could conceal. Never had she felt so agitated, so mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life. She was most forcibly struck. The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel, to Miss Bates! (325)

These are but a few examples where the reader has felt Emma’s pain. With each of her mistakes, we share Emma’s self-reproaches. Austen further narrows the possibilities of the characters with whom the reader will gain inner knowledge. By carefully selecting these characters with whom we become more closely acquainted, she allows the reader to become more intimate with her focal characters while the ancillary ones remain static. While we

sympathize with Emma as she feels tremendous guilt for hurting Miss Bates in the Box Hill scene, our sympathy for Miss Bates, the victim of the unkind remark, is only mildly evoked.

As Mezei says: “Because the narrator focalizes extensively through Emma, the reader, thus privy to Emma’s thoughts and doubts, is given every opportunity to be sympathetic to Emma, particularly as the novel progresses and Emma’s *blunders* increase” (75). Because of this extensive focalization through Emma, the reader is able to be not only sympathetic, but also to know what Emma is thinking before she knows it herself. Austen plays with the reader as she controls the level of intimacy that the reader is able to maintain with the characters. For instance, the reader surmises that Emma has an interest in Mr. Knightley before she herself realizes it:

But Mr. Knightley does not want to marry. I am sure he has not the least idea of it. Do not put it into his head. Why should he marry? He is as happy as possible by himself; with his farm, and his sheep, and his library, and all the parish to manage; and he is extremely fond of his brother’s children. He has no occasion to marry, either to fill up his time or his heart. (204)

Mr. Knightley has never implied or asserted that he does not want to marry. This is another instance when Emma takes an idea and makes everything bend to it. Emma perceives Mr. Knightley’s situation in this way because it so closely parallels her perception of her own standing, apparent in her words regarding her own marriage aspirations:

I must see somebody very superior to any one I have seen yet to be tempted; [. . .] and I do *not* wish to see any such person. [. . .] I cannot really change for the better. [. . .] I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. [. . .] Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want—[. . .] I shall be very well off with the children of a sister I love so much to care about. (92-93)

In Emma’s rationalization about marriage, Austen has, without fanfare, directly correlated a male and a female in the same interior sphere of worldliness. Through Austen’s alternations between an interior view of Emma’s consciousness and the outside narrator’s



sympathetic perspective of this unorthodox character, the reader is able to get an outside sense of how different is Emma's role as a female in the story. Mr. Knightley aptly points out Emma's distinctiveness on one of the rare occasions when Austen allows conversation to take place without Emma's presence, when Mr. Knightley is speaking to Mrs. Weston. In this instance, however, even though Emma is not physically present during the exchange, the topic of the discussion is, naturally, Emma. During the interchange, Mr. Knightley postulates that, while Mrs. Weston was appointed as Emma's governess during her stay with the Woodhouses, it was Mrs. Weston receiving the preponderance of the education, not Emma:

But you were preparing yourself to be an excellent wife all the time you were at Hartfield. You might not give Emma such a complete education as your powers would seem to promise, but you were receiving a very good education from *her*, on the very material matrimonial point of submitting your own will and doing as you were bid. (53)

With this statement by Mr. Knightley, Austen has positioned Emma, though female, on the same plane as the male subject, and has, through his masculine eyes, both affirmed that Emma has many masculine traits and identified the traits apparently prized by males in females. After the character of Emma has become sympathetic, we then do not question the fact that Emma, situated in the appropriate place in her society, continually challenges male authority in the form of Mr. George Knightley. Through the interactions between Emma and the sometimes mistaken Mr. Knightley, Austen opens the way for this male authority to be challenged. Although Mr. Knightley is often right in his assessments, as he was above, he is not *always* right. His reading of Emma's interactions with Frank Churchill is one case in point; he allows his jealousy of Frank's flirtations with Emma to cloud his judgment of Frank and also of Emma's feelings toward himself, a clearly realistic reaction. Shortly after the neighborhood is abuzz with the news of Frank Churchill's and Jane Fairfax's secret, prolonged engagement, Mr. Knightley

believes that Emma will be in need of comfort due to his misjudgment of the depth of Emma's feelings for Frank:

For a moment or two nothing was said, and she was unsuspecting of having excited any particular interest till she found her arm drawn within his and pressed against his heart, and heard him thus saying, in a tone of great sensibility, speaking low, "Time, my dearest Emma, time will heal the wound. Your own excellent sense, your exertions for your father's sake—I know you will not allow yourself—" Her arm was pressed again as he added, in a more broken and subdued accent, "The feelings of the warmest friendship—indignation—abominable scoundrel!" (365)

Mr. Knightley's error in judgment allows for Emma's justification in questioning masculine sagacity, and leaves the door open for Austen to use Emma's forthrightness to further expound on an emerging female awareness. As Claudia L. Johnson has noted, Emma proffers a feminist, pragmatic view on what is important on the outside, particularly where men are concerned. Emma displays this confident insight when speaking to Mr. Knightley on Harriet's prospects for finding a husband, and they are discussing Emma's view that Harriet's odds for finding an appropriate mate are increased because she is attractive:

Waiving that point, however, and supposing her to be, as you describe her, only pretty and good-natured, let me tell you that in the degree she possesses them, they are not trivial recommendations to the world in general, for she is, in fact, a beautiful girl, and must be thought so by ninety-nine people out of an hundred; and till it appears that men are much more philosophic on the subject of beauty than they are generally supposed, till they do fall in love with well-informed minds instead of handsome faces, a girl with such loveliness as Harriet has a certainty of being admired and sought after [. . .] (74)

This conjecture about the value of loveliness has such a familiar ring that one must be reminded that it was quite a daring and modern debate for the eighteenth century, especially considering that it is a female who is ironically making the point. Austen has here allowed Emma to assert a claim on the male view of women, and it is not necessarily flattering to men.

This statement by Emma demonstrates that her view of the world in relation to women is expanding, and it is bound to lead her on an intellectual journey.

In *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England*, Rogers notes that “Austen presented the familiar theme of women’s economic plight with brilliant ruthless realism, as she demonstrated that women were practically forced to marry and yet were hobbled in their opportunities to get a husband” (226). Certainly, a clear example of what Rogers discusses is demonstrated during Harriet’s conversation with Emma about Emma’s assumption that she will never wish to marry. Shocked at Emma’s attitude toward marriage, Harriet says, “But still, you will be an old maid! And that’s so dreadful!” to which Emma answers, “Never mind, Harriet, I shall not be a poor old maid; and it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public!” (93). Through this interaction between Harriet and Emma, the reader can assume that it is only a good move to remain single if one has plenty of funds to support oneself. It also reflects the apparent attitude of society. It was acceptable to be an old maid if one were self-sufficient; however, it was pitiful if one were dependent on others for one’s livelihood, as was Miss Bates, an already peripheral member of the upper class, who had long been sliding down into poverty.

According to Rogers, Austen’s skill as a writer made her novels realistic though her plots dealt with romance and marriage:

Although Austen’s view of the position of women was less advanced than those of many predecessors, her superior artistry made her fiction more convincing, in terms of asserting female worth as well as of presenting life. Her insights are incorporated into the total structure of her novels, and her plots are realistic rather than tritely romantic. (228)

Roger’s idea that Austen’s view of the position of women is not as developed as her predecessors is apt to generate debate, particularly with this reader. Rather, another perspective might be that Austen’s accurate perception of women’s limitations in society provided the

impetus for creating a character as liberated (relatively speaking) as Emma—“a heroine whom no one but myself might like.” While bound by certain real societal limitations, Austen created this character to be not only a female who felt, and asserted, her self-worth, but who also felt unhobbled by society’s expectation that she would marry, and marry well. Instead, she felt no economic need to marry, and she had no desire to marry just for the sake of marriage and so was not forced to the altar, like so many women of her time, but went there of her own volition and on her own terms.

The journey undertaken in *Emma* is, according to Kohn, a female bildungsroman. If this is even remotely so, as Kohn contends, how does Emma grow? A good manifestation of her growth is the change in her attitude toward Harriet from the beginning to the end of the book. Emma begins the story insensitively thinking of Harriet as an object, a project, an item that could be useful to her. She refers to her as such several times:

As a walking companion, Emma had very early foreseen how *useful* she might find her [Harriet] [. . .] She had ventured once alone to Randalls, but it was not pleasant; and *a* Harriet Smith, therefore, *one whom she could summon at any time* to a walk, would be a valuable addition to her privileges. [. . .] Altogether she was quite convinced of Harriet Smith’s being exactly the young friend she wanted—exactly *the something* which her home required. (44) (emphasis added)

At the end of the story, when Harriet’s romantic adventure has come to a happy conclusion, Emma continues to refer to her as “a” Harriet; however, it is in a much more affectionate context:

Serious she was, very serious, in her thankfulness and in her resolutions; and yet there was no preventing a laugh, sometimes in the very midst of them. She must laugh at such a close—such an end of the doleful disappointment of five weeks back—such a heart—such a Harriet! (405)

This further illustrates Emma’s relief over her escape from having seriously damaged Harriet’s emotional health and hopes for the future, and it also clearly shows her progression

from thinking of Harriet as a thing to believing her a living, breathing person, worthy of esteem. Clearly, Emma's self-awareness has blossomed. While Emma's self-understanding increases, however, other characters are not developed to any great degree; but, then, it is not important for *them* to evolve. Their significance becomes apparent as it relates to Emma's blossoming. How she acts toward, and reacts to, all the other people in the novel is the focal point. In this respect, the entire novel exists on a spiral premise, with Emma at the center and all the other players around her. Emma is busy making the journey to feminine perspective; though some of the other characters make physical expeditions, Emma is the one who is really traveling.

Certainly, one perceives when reading *Emma* that Emma is not a conventionally demure late eighteenth century lady. While Emma is often clueless in her observations and mistaken in her judgments, she is still outspoken in her beliefs, self-assured in her actions, and aggressive in attempting to influence those around her. The fact that a woman even has formulated goals that do not relate directly to herself is one step. Emma moves even further as a woman by attempting to control the course of not only her life, but to have influence on the lives of those around her.

Austen has been able to pen a novel about an intelligent, articulate, female who is independent both financially and in her views of the world. While she has placed Emma in upper class society, this does not necessarily indicate that Austen "was a conservative holding the values of the landed gentry in the late eighteenth century" (Claudia L. Johnson 337) as one camp of Austen critics claims. Alternately, she should probably not be considered "as a subversive who undercuts the very premises upon which English society rests" (337), the apparent sentiment of the other camp. She most likely sits best on middle ground. Rather, the upper class locale in which Emma is placed is a perch from which Austen was knowledgeable and comfortable, and it facilitated the appearance that Emma followed a mode of conduct that

conformed to the manners expected of the time. Outwardly, Emma presents the facade of being a traditional woman of the eighteenth century. She lovingly cares for her widowed father and ensures that his diet, which could best be described as milquetoast, like his personality, is to his preference. She keeps him surrounded with the suitable number of people and provided with just the right amount and type of entertainment in the form of backgammon and whist at the appropriate hours. She makes her daily round of social calls, and she performs the charity work that would be expected from someone in her social position. She plays the pianoforte, sings, and paints just well enough to be passable, and she also knows how to dance. A dutiful sibling and aunt, she loves her sister and her sister's children. She does not discuss affairs of state, display knowledge of the political situation of her country or those around her, or discuss the economy. Yet she knows much more than she lets on. Although she does not use the knowledge for her own benefit, she reveals insight on the subject of what will and will not attract a man to marry. She has a sense of what is just, and she does not normally knowingly hurt people. When she errs, she feels it acutely, and works to improve herself.

These superficial perceptions of Emma may be ascertained through cursory reading of the novel. However, Austen's extraordinary, many faceted literary mastery allows the reader to enter into Emma's consciousness, her inwardness, as Woods pointed out, while at the same time keeping us outside of the minds of most of the other characters. She has permitted Emma not only to recognize her errors, but to direct her course of action, and redemption, by attempting to correct them; she has endowed Emma with, as Trilling commented "a moral life as a man has a moral life" (Claudia Johnson xxiii). She has allowed us to feel, from the interior, Emma's pain and remorse when her plans go awry and people are hurt as a result of it, has allowed us to stand with her instead of against her, as Booth concluded. While outwardly placing constraints on

Emma insofar as her social position is concerned, Austen nonetheless allows Emma liberal latitude in her insight and also in the development and growth of her character. Austen has moved from the outside to the inside view to apportion, at will, the knowledge provided to the reader, to direct the narrative toward the inevitable conclusion expected from a novel of her day—marriage. Austen has, in a sense, been able to demonstrate, through Emma's negotiation in relationship to the bigger world, a different view of how women in the eighteenth century can relate to the big picture. She has circumvented the normal, happily-ever-after ending with a different sort of finale. Emma gets married, yes, but she does not capitulate. She has directed her own destiny—she remains situated in her own domain, at the helm, as she has been since the beginning of the story.

Has Emma displayed an awakening female worldly perspective, and, as Kohn indicated, learned to live within her society without compromising herself? Certainly she has. She has evolved from a self-absorbed character into a compassionate, sensitive being. She has married a man who is her intellectual equal and whom she respects; she has married for love, and she has remained in control of her household. She has not had to carry all of her worldly possessions to the established home of her husband, there to acclimate herself to his atmosphere and his rule; she has moved on, but not out of Hartfield. Austen has also gone a little further and presented an unconventional male perspective. We know from our experience with George Knightley that he will continue to criticize when Emma stumbles, but he will also not prohibit her from roaming free; he will be there to encourage her to rise when she falters, but she will regain her footing under her own power. She has sacrificed a little, but gained much. Does the reader, upon finishing the novel, think Emma will continue to blunder? Of course, but this is not necessarily a negative criticism of a character we have come to appreciate by the end of the novel. We know,

through our experience and interaction with Emma in our reading of the novel, that, while she will err again, she will feel remorse, and, most of all, she will learn from her mistakes—she will continue to evolve. She has embraced the experience of having a moral life, “like a man has a moral life.” Austen has mimicked the hero’s journey, but her traveler is garbed in a dress instead of pants, and her weapons have been words, not armor. Her heroine has faced her challenges and has overcome them. Austen has used, as Claudia L. Johnson contends, the means at her disposal—the education and attitudes available to Austen as a woman—to portray a realistic, anomalous female character. She has also used them to announce that women think, reason, learn and grow. Thus, Austen makes her contribution by using the arsenal available to her in the eighteenth hundreds to liberate the female perspective.



## Chapter 4: A Revolution to Evolution and the Completion of the Self-Awareness Journey

### *Austen's Feminist Consciousness—Rooted in Reality*

Several of Austen's critics from varying periods seem to want to posit her in extreme, opposing modes of thought. Either she has written novels of little interest and in a boring fashion or she is very innovative in the development of new narrative techniques: "a conservative holding the values of the landed gentry in the late eighteenth century or [. . .] a subversive who undercuts the very premises upon which English society rests" (Claudia L. Johnson 337). Perhaps one should operate in a more moderate fashion and bear in mind that she may more appropriately fall somewhere in the middle. Austen was speaking with, and to, a growing number of women. In the midst of a period of social and economical adjustment, she was able to do so because she was speaking to women with a feminine narrative voice, signifying the verbal emergence of a female consciousness. Because of her awareness, her talent, and her ability to get her work published, Austen not only had something of interest to say, but she also had the means by which to articulate it—she had a voice, a vision, and a pen. Austen was thus able to oblige an increasingly vocal, formerly marginal, readership by authoring novels about women, narrated by feminine voices, and told from female perspectives. While working within the confines of the romantic novel, Austen also provided her audience with the empowerment of literary articulation, and her novels most often had more to say than the words would initially indicate. They spoke to the web in which women of varying classes found themselves caught; they expressed the awareness of inequality among class and gender; but most importantly, they revealed women's awakening intelligent perception of the world around them and of their changing role in human society.

Austen's novels, at first glance, appear to be commonplace, feminine reading material. It seems that her contemporary critics, most of whom were male, desired to keep the public reading audience, and, perhaps, Austen herself, thinking that this was the arena in which her printed works belonged. Her male counterparts and reviewers of the day complacently deluded themselves into believing that female authors like Austen, presumably because of their limited education and experience, did not have any deep philosophical contributions to make to the literary world. This male view of Austen challenged her and her colleagues to articulate an emerging female awareness of the world, and their established, often-undesirable place in it. More importantly, they were able to do so seemingly within the parameters set by the prevailing male society.

In *Emma*, Austen proved capable not only of providing social commentary on the increasingly tumultuous interaction between people of various stations, but also of giving women a voice through the singular character of her protagonist, Emma. Austen was able to achieve this through the use of innovative narrative techniques that allow the reader to become acquainted, and sympathetic, with the main character, always a female. This feminist stratagem continues to be analyzed and studied today, in part because of its significance in allowing women a collective voice for an emerging feminine consciousness that continues to develop. Austen, who probably only had a minimal idea of how compelling would be her voice, possessed powers of consciousness and an intimate knowledge of human nature that she was able to apply to the everyday life of her characters. It has been said that Austen took much of what she wrote from her own experiences. However, it seems apparent that she was successful at writing such happenings because, while she personalized much, she also universalized the human experience. Then, she channeled it through women's voices.

Austen was able, through her subtle discourse, to portray a continuously evolving character, a strong, independent woman named Emma, with an intelligent mind of her own, who achieved Austen's evolving ideal of ladyhood, who was able to "to compromise between power and propriety to live within her community without compromising herself" (Kohn 52). Austen, through Emma, has rejected many of the skewed masculine values unfavorable to women prevalent during her time; and she has done so quietly, not braced for war, but, rather, armed with paper and pen and ready for mediation. Her innovative narrative techniques allowed Emma to evolve amidst a circle of characters who serve to magnify her departure from the norm in her awareness of the world around her and the importance of her personal place in it.

Austen universalized the human experience, endowing Emma with masculine traits, traits often enhanced by posturing the more feminine character of her father alongside her. Austen's description of Miss Bates also characterizes Mr. Woodhouse: "She was a great talker upon little matters, which exactly suited Mr. Woodhouse, full of trivial communications and harmless gossip" (40). Austen allows Mr. Woodhouse to reveal himself further when he and his family are at the Westons' home for a dinner party, and the winter weather begins to worsen:

"What is to be done, my dear Emma? What is to be done?" was Mr. Woodhouse's first exclamation, and all that he could say for some time. To her he looked for comfort; and her assurances of safety, her representation of the excellence of the horses and of James and of their having so many friends about them, revived him a little. (126)

Our view of the world through Emma's eyes allows us, as Booth said, to stand with her and not against her. Austen's subtle shifts of consciousness from everyone to no one in particular to Emma occur without dramatics, in the blink of an eye, but always there exists a feminine perspective of the world, no matter who is speaking.

The evolution of *Emma*, and Emma, can be seen as a journey for the title character, her destination being feminine self-awareness. If one looks at *Emma* as an abstract journey, it is circular in nature—it both begins and ends at Hartfield, her home. In fact, the entire novel is steeped in circularities, and Emma takes many circular jaunts in her domestic sphere, always leading her back to the same place. Emma does not ever go physically far afield—the road to Box Hill, probably the farthest she ventures in the novel, is not very far from home—but she does travel. Her voyage, however, does not follow an itinerary. Emma's journey, as is women's ascent to feminine consciousness, is internal rather than external, movement from the outside to the inside. She follows a path of intrinsic growth and maturation without actually moving far from home. The end of her journey happens to be coincidentally where she started, but, by the time of her arrival back, she is a far different person than the Emma who first undertook the trip. Since we have traveled with her, we, too, are transformed by her expeditions. This is no typical novel about manners or conduct. Through Emma's emerging consciousness, Austen shares with us her feminine awareness and brilliant articulation of it by using various narrative techniques, irony, and feminist stratagems. Emma's journey is significant because it is that of a woman in a patriarchal world. Emma is observing, thinking, feeling, and evolving as a person. She has her own thoughts, she is intelligent, and she is increasingly aware of her place of importance in society. The same is true of the author. Austen, along with the increasing female authorship, proved that one did not have to be male to write, to have something to say, to have a place of importance in the world around her, to interact as a sentient being in the network of society. She continues to speak to today's women of the importance of their place in the world. According to Kohn, Austen's continued popularity is closely allied with "ladyhood":

Like Austen, who was afraid that Emma was a "heroine whom no one but myself will much like," reading Emma as a lesson in "ladyhood" is a critical approach

that most modern readers will not like. But such a reading also helps to explain the continuing popularity of Austen inside and outside academia. The dialectic between female power and female propriety continues to act as a divisive force in twentieth-century America just as it was in nineteenth-century England. One of the great strengths of *Emma*, for both nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers, is Austen's portrait of a lady who learns to compromise between power and propriety to live within her community without compromising herself. (52)

Hodding Carter once said of motherhood: "There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots; the other is wings." Austen's female awareness and lack of trepidation in articulating it helped nurture a rising feminism that continues its ascent. Although Austen never married, and she had no children, she was still a member of the sisterhood of women to whom she could leave behind a heritage. Her last will and testament does not mention one of her bequests—the one she left to the collective of women—promotion of female consciousness; and, though she did not live to see it, the figurative development of feminine literary wings could certainly be considered a direct result of this legacy.

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